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RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0251  
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 3210  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001627

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: STUDENTS PROTEST IN MERIDA

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Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,  
for Reason 1.4(b).

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Summary  
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¶1. (U) Student protests in Merida on May 24-25 turned violent, resulting in dozens of injuries and drawing the attention of top BRV officials in Caracas. A Supreme Court (TSJ) decision to suspend annual university elections ignited a battle pitting students and university officials on one side, and police forces and the National Guard on the other. Student and university leaders claimed their autonomy was infringed upon on two fronts: by the TSJ decision to alter student elections and by the National Guard's entering university property. The BRV responded by assailing the student leaders as subversives infiltrating the student sector, and by spinning a wild theory that they were part of an international, USG-funded conspiracy to destabilize and embarrass the BRV. The aftershocks of the violence reached the capital, eliciting public defenses from high-ranking BRV officials and parliamentary claims of conspiracy, including involvement of opposition groups and presidential candidates.  
END SUMMARY

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VIOLENCE ERUPTS IN MERIDA  
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¶2. (C) Students at the University of the Andes (ULA) in Merida (approximately 400 miles from Caracas) took to the streets on May 24, protesting a Supreme Court decision to suspend annual university elections. The university elections were suspended at the behest of Geyson Guzman, President of the ULA chapter of the Federation of University Centers (FCU), who claimed that present conditions were not apt for elections. Last year, Guzman insisted on the yearly elections (the result of which was his election); he is alleged to have received considerable funds from the local Chavista governor for his campaign, a former Merida mayor

told Embassy officials last year.

13. (U) Apparently the march resulted in violent clashes. Not surprisingly, conflicting reports of who initiated and bore the brunt of the violence have surfaced. Initially, government outlets alleged over 30 police officials were injured, including one threatened with rape, while no students were injured. Students, in turn, said dozens of students succumbed to tear gas and reported no less than eight students injured with plastic bullets. Military leaders said on May 31 that all wounded individuals are recovering, notably not indicating how many of the injured were students and how many were police officials.

14. (U) The violence subsided within 48 hours, and the confrontation between students and police forces migrated from violent to rhetorical, as university officials accused the National Guard and police forces of infringing on the university's autonomy by entering university grounds. Both state and federal officials have repeatedly stated that no police forces ever entered university grounds; rather, they patrolled the main road outside the university to allow for safe transit of others. One student leader claimed to have evidence that tanks, armored vehicles, and National Guardsmen were inside university installations.

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WHO IS NIXON MORENO?  
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15. (C) Student leader and FCU-ULA presidential candidate Nixon Moreno, a leader of the protesting students, is not new to conflict in the BRV. During the coup of April 2002, Moreno participated in the demonstrations in Merida state, leading crowds who marched on the state capital to lynch MVR

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governor Florencio Porras. Pro-government media labels Moreno a subversive who seeks to infiltrate and inflame the student movement. (NOTE: Moreno has been a law student at the ULA for about ten years. In Venezuela, as elsewhere in Latin America, it is not uncommon for student leaders to remain officially enrolled in universities for many years. Many chavista student leaders have also been on campus for more than a decade. END NOTE).

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U.S.A.? UNITED STUDENTS ASSEMBLY  
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16. (U) Minor sympathetic demonstrations have already occurred at other university installations in San Cristobal, Tachira, and Barquisimeto, Lara. Stalin Gonzalez, President of the Central University of Venezuela (Caracas) chapter of the Federation of University Centers, accused Guzman of being a government sympathizer. Gonzalez indicated on May 26 a plan to convene student leaders in Merida to pursue protests on a national level. Students in Caracas, in fact, staged a peaceful sit-in on May 31.

17. (C) Ruling party National Assembly Deputy Tarek El Aissami on May 26 accused the United States of playing a part in the unrest. El Aissami claims he has evidence that student leaders, Moreno in particular, have met on several occasions with senior Embassy officials. (NOTE: Moreno was a young leader IV in 2004, and has met with PAS staff.) El Aissami has called for the investigation of alleged U.S. involvement in these "terrorist acts." For his part, Caracas student leader Gonzalez stated on May 29 that "yes, we are going to march...but this is not a macabre, yankee imperialist plot."

18. (U) Minister of Interior and Justice Jesse Chacon followed up with a press conference on May 29. He alleged that the students rose up with the intention of damaging the image of Venezuela and presenting the nation as a dangerous

place as OPEC leaders are set to arrive in Caracas on June 1.

On May 30, Chacon directly accused opposition organizations National Resistance Command (CNR) and Bandera Roja (BR) ("Red Flag") of being responsible for fomenting the violence in Merida. Previously, government accounts had tied Moreno to the opposition movement Movimiento 13. Together with Minister of Superior Education Samuel Moncada, Chacon also insinuated the involvement of pre-presidential candidates Teodoro Petkoff and Julio Borges. Both have rejected that accusation.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) Violent student demonstrations are not new to Venezuela, particularly not in Merida. Perhaps the BRV is coming down harder at this time because they want to head off any discord on the eve of the OPEC conference. The government media has, in fact, given extensive press coverage to chavista student leaders, to ensure the "right" message is transmitted. We are not surprised that the BRV would accuse us of instigating the student protests. What the student protesters realize is that their complaint has nothing to do with the USG, and everything to do with the BRV's continued intervention in university politics to favor chavistas.  
BROWNFIELD